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Jonathan Master, *Provincial Soldiers and Imperial Instability in the 'Histories' of Tacitus*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. Pp. viii, 238. ISBN 9780472119837. \$70.00.

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Preview

Tacitus' *Histories* have never received the attention lavished on the *Annals*, and provincial and external narratives in both works are often treated as ancillaries to the "main action" in Rome. Master's book contributes to the slow but steady righting of the first imbalance by taking aim at the latter assumption.¹ His thesis is that the provinces are in fact the center of the *Histories*'s didactic mission, namely, to show that Rome's reliance on provincial manpower will have dangerous consequences for the empire unless these soldiers, like the Italian allies before them, are given citizenship and fully integrated into Roman society.

Master argues that this is an unambiguous and specific didactic program aimed at Tacitus' Trajanic readership, and that such specific lessons are a hallmark of ancient historiography, although they often lie below the surface and require the reader to navigate a polyphony of narrative voices and opinions. Didacticism, in his view, offers the potential to reunite historians and literary scholars divided by the "rhetorical turn" by grounding ancient historiography in "the lessons of history" (18-19). Nevertheless, the book Master has written is, as he admits, firmly on the literary side of the room. Although there are nods to scholarship on ethnic soldiers in modern colonial regimes (19-25) and on ethnic identity in the Roman empire (26-27), Master by and large avoids historical questions about the historical realities of provincial revolts or the influence of Tacitus' Trajanic context on his depiction of military policy a generation earlier. Rather, Master aims to tease out a consistent *presentation* of provincial soldiers and their consequences for the empire in the narrative of the *Histories*. He does this largely by comparing speeches and narrative portions of the work to earlier texts such as Cicero's *Pro Balbo*, Sallust's *Histories*, Augustus' *Res Gestae*, and historiographical traditions about the Social War.

The Batavian Revolt narrated in *Histories* 4 and 5 dominates chapters 1, 4 and 5, with periodic excursions to relevant episodes in the earlier books, while the two central chapters consider respectively the preface and the overall “annalistic” organization of the *Histories*. The result is a book that is not for the novice. Master jumps abruptly backward and forward in time and text, and he does not waste time with historical summary. The reader is expected to be already familiar with the persons, events, and sometimes Latin of the *Histories* to a high degree of detail.

The first chapter falls into two quite distinct parts. In the first, Master sets out his methodology, through a close analysis of the speeches of the Batavian leader Julius Civilis. In spite of the fact that Civilis is characterized as “dishonest and treacherous”, Master argues, his criticisms are shown to have merit, and moreover, to fit within a tradition about the proper recompense of soldiers and allies who fight for Rome. This leads Master to the general interpretative proposition that the “lesson” of a given passage should be found in its cumulative and intertextual effect rather than based on pronouncements by the historiographical narrator. The second half of the chapter turns to provincial soldiers throughout the *Histories*. Master argues that provincial manpower is shown by Tacitus to be vital to the maintenance of the empire, but also a constant source of instability in its present form. Here the strengths of Master’s approach are most evident: he points out that there are implicit Tacitean claims about realia behind the application of well-worn topoi. Tacitus characterizes the Vitellian and Flavian armies of 69 as not just “like” barbarians, Master argues, but shows them to be actual foreigners, provincial soldiers who enter Rome as an alien city with complete ignorance of its history and customs and little incentive to preserve it.

Chapter 2 moves (backward) to the opening geographical survey of the empire in *Histories* 1.4-11, which Master reads as a “reminder of how tenuous Rome’s grasp on its empire is” (75). Master emphasizes the novelty of using geography rather than time as a structuring device. He argues that it signals a “different way of understanding history” than that used by, e.g., Thucydides and Sallust: for Tacitus, explanations of events in a fragmented empire with many potential sources of power have to be sought in “location, distance, and diversity” rather than simply in time past (84).

In Chapter 3, Master broadens his scope to the form of the *Histories*. He argues that the work invokes and then subverts the conventions of “annalistic” historiography, as civil war and an expanding empire confuse standard annalistic elements like the consulship, the price of grain, and the division into *res internae* and *res externae*. Few will dispute the extension of Ginsburg’s analysis from the *Annals* to the *Histories*², and Master’s readings of Tacitus are at their most convincing when he shows that the historian first imposes the “annalistic” norms of linear chronology and neat division into *res internae* and *res externae* and only then disrupts them (133-38). One could have wished for similar depth and precision in the treatment of other “annalistic” features. The grain supply gets a suggestive

but incomplete page and half, and prodigies are omitted altogether, a strange gap considering the prominent Eastern portents of Vespasian's reign (e.g. *Hist.* 4.81-82). The absence of this archetypal annalistic preoccupation is especially noteworthy because Master consistently emphasizes the early Republican tradition in his lengthy and not always persuasive account of the "annalistic historiography" evoked by the consular dating that opens the *Histories* (but surely the *Historiae* of Sallust and Asinius Pollio are more relevant here than the *Annales* of Quadrigarius or even Livy?). Instead, there is a discussion of obituary notices, here oddly considered "another traditional category of annals" (122).³

Chapters 4 and 5 present Master's case for Tacitus' constructive argument: "the *Histories* point the way to lessons for how to regain a lasting stability in the provinces." In Chapter 4, Master analyzes repeated failed attempts to distinguish "Roman" from "Germanic" by both the leaders of the Batavian Revolt and the Roman generals who try to crush it, ending with a good account of the debate between the Tenciteri and the assimilated German inhabitants of Cologne (157-63). The lesson for the reader, Master concludes, is that Roman and Provincial have become inextricable. Chapter 5 argues that Tacitus models his account of the Batavian Revolt and the motives of its leaders on the Social War, which was only resolved when Roman citizenship was extended across Italy. After underlining the theme of "identity transformation" in the *Histories*, Master draws attention to the precariousness of Roman identity in northern Italy (176-81), an Italic pun in Vitellius' name (182- 85), and general historical similarities between Social Wars and the events of 69-70.

A brief Conclusion reiterates the thesis that the *Histories* provide a warning and a blueprint for imperial Rome's relationship with her subject peoples, adducing the excursus on the Jews in *Histories* 5 as a further example of the utility in reading for a complex, constructive message beneath the apparent prejudices and cynical dismissals of the work's narrator.

Specific thesis and readings aside, Master's most provocative move is to split the "narrator" of the *Histories* cleanly from the historian: "When the narrator of the *Histories* most obviously attempts to frame the reception of the content of the narrative... readers should be wary of accepting his framing." (203). Thus, for Master, the Tacitean narrator may undermine the credibility of speakers like Civilis, engage in ethnic stereotyping, and offer bitterly pessimistic *sententiae*, but the "historian"—understood as something like the intentionality of the work as a whole — shows an optimistic path to imperial stability through full provincial enfranchisement. It is in this sense that Master claims to "reconnect historiography and history" by "explor[ing] what lessons the *Histories* and other ancient historical works might be setting out before their readers." (203).

This claim deserves to be argued and entertained seriously. Although "persona-theory" has long been a staple of scholarship on satiric genres, and the "further voices" of the *Aeneid* are well known, the historiographical "I" — perhaps because of the genre's reliance on the authority of its author

as a purveyor of the truth – has resisted such disentanglement from the persona taken on by the historian.⁴ On one level, Master is surely right. The meaning of Tacitus' historical works is often more complex and subtle than the first-person comments of the historian would seem to allow, and Master's insistence that we not take refuge in the easy answers of "ambiguity" and "ambivalence" is salutary. It may likewise be more satisfying to resolve such discrepancies by imagining a Tacitean "author function" that plays a long game for the benefit of the perceptive reader rather than, say, the old picture of an embittered historian whose commitment to accurate reporting is at war with his desire to insinuate the worst.⁵ On the other hand, some readers may find it hard to embrace a historically informed reading of Tacitus that requires divorcing the work's message and claims to social utility from those of the powerful voice that claims ownership in the *Histories*' first sentence: *Initium mihi operis Servius Galba iterum...*

The book is well-produced, although with occasional inconsistencies in the style of primary source citation, italicization of non-English words, and the normalization of v and u in Latin text. Among the very few typos, I note the following: p. vii for "at the Het Valkhof Museum" read "at the Valkhof Museum", p. 5 for "convivorum elegantiam" read "conviviorum elegantiam", p. 46-47 n.48 for "Steel" read "Steele" (2x), p. 77 n.8 for "Raflaub" read "Raaflaub"; p. 133 for *hae tibi artes* read *hae tibi erunt artes*.

Notes:

^{1.} Master's book joins the monographs of R. Ash, *Ordering Anarchy: Armies and Leaders in Tacitus' Histories*, London 1999 (BMCR [2000.05.21](#)), H. Haynes, *Empire of Make-Believe: Tacitus on Imperial Rome*, Berkeley 2003, T. Joseph, *Tacitus the Epic Successor*, Brill 2012 (BMCR [2013.05.17](#)), and the commentaries of Damon on *Histories* I (2003, BMCR [2003.09.14](#)) and Ash on *Histories* II (2007, BMCR [2008.10.34](#)) in the Cambridge Greek and Latin Commentaries series.

^{2.} J. Ginsburg, *Tradition and Theme in the Annals of Tacitus*, Salem NH, 1984.

^{3.} Extended obituaries were in fact regarded as a relatively recent innovation: Seneca the Elder, *Suas.* 6.21.

^{4.} See e.g. R. O. A. M. Lyne, *Further Voices in Vergil's Aeneid*, Oxford 1987, W. S. Anderson, *Essays on Roman Satire*, Princeton 1982, M. M. Winkler, *The persona in three Satires of Juvenal*, Hildesheim 1983.

^{5.} For the latter interpretation, see e.g. I. S. Ryberg *Tacitus' Art of Innuendo*, TAPA 73, 1942: 383-404, B. Walker, *The Annals of Tacitus: A Study in the Writing of History*, Manchester 1952, 82-157.

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